

Conventicles in the Kirk, 1619-37. The Emergence of a Radical Party

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Reactions to Innovation and Persecution in the Kirk

In the years after the triumph of the covenanters in 1638 the kirk in Scotland was troubled by bitter disputes concerning the legitimacy of conventicles or private prayer meetings. Most ministers considered such meetings incompatible with presbyterianism, while a radical minority supported the meetings. It is the purpose of this paper to provide a background to these disputes by tracing the history of private meetings in the preceding twenty years.

The disputes arose out of the varying answers given to the question of how the godly, those who saw themselves as upholding the true traditions of the kirk against James VI and Charles I, should react to persecution. What action should they take? And what should their attitude be to the kirk since it was (as they saw it) deformed by corruptions imposed by the monarchy?

There was general agreement over answers to the second question. Those who opposed royal religious policy continued to accept that the established kirk was basically a true kirk, even though corrupt. Samuel Rutherford (minister of Anwoth in Kirkcudbrightshire until banished to Aberdeen in 1637) summed up an extreme version of this attitude in startling phrases. He called the kirk "our harlot mother", "my whorish mother" and "that poor miserable harlot".¹ The kirk was his mother and thus he owed it loyalty. But it had fallen into prostitution and therefore he could not follow all its ways or obey it fully. His duty was to work to restore and reform it, neither abandoning it because of its sins nor condoning such sins.

So the kirk was a true kirk, but corrupt. What did this mean in practice? Those opposed to royal policy might be agreed on their basic attitude to it, but they differed widely over how this attitude should lead them to behave. How much obedience was to be given because it was a true kirk? How far was it to be resisted because it was corrupt? At the one extreme lay complete submission to the kirk's authority even though it was corrupt. The other extreme, of "separation" (as adopted by extreme English puritans), of disowning the established church completely and setting up a new one, was regarded as out of the question by all Scots ministers. But a few came near to separation in practice while in principle still continuing to accept the kirk as a true kirk. They refused to countenance its corrupt services, or to obey its corrupt hierarchy, but still regarded themselves as

¹ S. Rutherford, *Letters*, ed. A. A. Bonar (Edinburgh and London, 1894), 87, 103, 191, 204, 213, 216, 290.

members of it — an attitude analogous to that of New England puritans who in principle saw the church of England as a true church but in practice defied it and went their own ways.²

The great majority of Scots ministers and laymen who opposed the changes in church government and worship which were bringing the kirk into line with the church of England — “the creeping episcopalianism of the Stuarts” as it has been aptly called³ — reached compromises somewhere between the two extremes of complete submission and virtual separation. Most verged on complete submission, albeit reluctantly, to the changes in the kirk rather than defy its authority. Here the government benefitted from the traditions and ideals of the reformed kirk in Scotland of disciplined and centralised church government. Men chose obedience even to corrupt practices rather than threaten the order and unity of the kirk — they had a horror of anarchy and schism. Many refused to practise innovations such as those introduced by the Five Articles of Perth of 1618 — but only so far as this was possible without direct defiance of authority. Thus many laymen stayed away from communion to avoid being ordered to kneel to receive the elements as one of the Five Articles directed. Some ministers connived at or secretly encouraged disobedience to the Articles, allowing communicants to accept the elements sitting. And, since on the whole the bishops were anxious to avoid trouble and were determined not to create martyrs, in many parts of the country a blind eye was turned to such fairly passive disobedience.

For a minority, however, a mere avoidance when possible of conformity to obnoxious practices was not enough. Some ministers felt the need to preach or otherwise testify openly against such corruptions, to denounce them publicly. A few such ministers were deprived of their livings; others by a judicious balance of defiance and partial recognition of the authority of the kirk managed to retain their livings while being recognised and revered as leaders of resistance to further changes in the kirk.

The opponents of royal authority saw themselves as conservatives, not revolutionaries. They wanted to restore the kirk to its pristine purity. But perhaps inevitably some of the staunchest opponents of the king began to go further. They still maintained — and indeed honestly believed — that they were merely asking for the restoration of former purity; in fact they were demanding more. These new demands arose in part naturally out of the circumstances of persecution, in part from the influence of English puritans. Firstly, they began to regard as corruptions in worship not only such recently introduced

² E. S. Morgan, *Visible Saints. The History of a Puritan Idea* (Ithaca, 1965), 64-5.

³ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (London, 1967), 398.

ceremonies as those contained in the Five Articles, but other practices which had always been accepted in the kirk but which were disliked by many English puritans. Thus in opposing new ceremonies these radicals came to examine all details of their traditional worship, and rejected some of them which had previously been unquestioned. This, however, did not become evident until after the overthrow of episcopacy in 1638, and it is the second way in which the radicals diverged from the previous practice of the kirk that this paper is concerned with.

Suffering from persecution, unable to obtain pure and godly public worship, the radicals took to holding private meetings to pray, sing psalms and discuss the state of religion. Sometimes a minister was present, sometimes not. Those taking part maintained that such meetings were necessary and that holding them was compatible with recognising the kirk as a true kirk and with presbyterian principles. But such reassurances were unacceptable to the majority of those opposing royal policy. For the majority the only acceptable forms of worship were private prayer, family exercise or worship led by the head of the family, and public worship of congregations. Any sort of private meeting for worship they looked on with deep suspicion as at least potentially anarchic, a step on the road to separation recalling such sects as the Family of Love, Brownists and Anabaptists — all emotive names calculated to rouse horror as implying religious anarchy.

Moreover the question of private meetings brought up problems of the concept of a church and its membership. Should the church on earth, the “visible church”, include all christians, or only the elect? Like other national churches, the kirk strove to be inclusive, to include virtually all inhabitants of Scotland. But separatists in England and elsewhere had tried to confine membership of their sects to the elect (so far as they could be identified). There was a fear that those holding private meetings in Scotland had such exclusive tendencies, that they looked upon themselves as better christians than their fellow men and would come in time to form a separate and exclusive church in Scotland. The radicals denied any such intentions, but in the event their beliefs and actions were to lead them nearer to such tendencies than they would admit. Just as the logic of events had driven some dissidents in the English church to adopt separatist and exclusive idcas, so a similar logic of persecution forced some Scots presbyterians some way down the same paths.

How far back the holding of private meetings by those opposed to James VI’s religious policies goes is not clear, but their origin may date from the introduction of the Five Articles of Perth in 1618; it is only after this that they can be traced.

Conventicles in Edinburgh

In February 1619 John Mean, two other Edinburgh merchants and a reader were summoned before the court of high commis-

sion for not observing Christmas.⁴ The following month a row broke out about kneeling to receive the elements at communion, the most hated of the Five Articles. There was bitter public criticism of burgh ministers, a leading part in this being taken by William Rig of Atherny, another merchant.⁵ He was said to be “a great precision” who affected “a singularitye in his apperell, (which gave occasione to one who was none of the wysest to tell him, upon a tyme, that his relligion and his breeches wer both out of the fashione)”.^{5a} The matter was brought up in the kirk session. John Mean was an elder and outspokenly denounced kneeling; what else he said is not known, but it was enough to make one of the ministers present call him an anabaptist and a man disobedient to the king who refused to recognise the authority of the kirk.⁶ “Anabaptist”, needless to say, is here used loosely as a word of abuse for someone refusing to obey authority, and tells us little of Mean’s beliefs.

At the Easter communion the next year, 1620, there was again trouble, and again Mean and Rig were involved, along with two booksellers and two skinners. They were charged with encouraging deprived and suspended ministers and receiving communion from them (without kneeling) instead of lawfully from their parish ministers. The king therefore ordered the exile of the six men to distant parts of the country, though in the end they were allowed to remain in Edinburgh — four on making some show of submission, Mean and Rig only through the leniency of the bishop.⁷

These six were regarded as the leaders of resistance in Edinburgh but they were not alone, for at this time the burgh’s ministers were active in denouncing what the historian David Calderwood called “the private meetings of some good Christians in Edinburgh, who conveened to deplore the iniquite of the time”. The ministers themselves had harsher words for the meetings, calling them privy conventicles of Brownists, Anabaptists, schismatics, separatists. One of the centres of such meetings was the house of Nicholas [sic] Balfour, the daughter of a former Edinburgh minister, and an English preacher called Hubert is mentioned as taking part in them.⁸

⁴ D. Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson (7 vols., Wodrow Society, 1842-9), vii, 349.

⁵ *Ibid.*, vii, 355-6.

^{5a} J. Gordon *History of Scots Affairs* (3 vols., Spalding Club, 1841), iii, 239.

⁶ Calderwood, *History*, vii, 357-9, 361, 362-4, 379.

⁷ *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland [RPCS], 1616-19*, ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh, 1894), 249-50, 264, 299, 328; Calderwood, *History*, vii, 434, 439-41, 447-8; D. Laing (ed.), *Original Letters Relating to the Ecclesiastical Affairs of Scotland, 1603-25* (2 vols., Bannatyne Club, 1851), ii, 624-6.

⁸ Calderwood, *History*, vii, 449.

Almost certainly Mean and Rig also took part in such meetings by 1620; certainly they were doing so by 1624 when religious disputes in Edinburgh next came into the open through the actions of "a sort of mutinous people". Led by Rig (now a baillie of the burgh), "puffed up with a conceit of his own abilities" according to the archbishop of St Andrews, they publicly challenged the doctrine of Edinburgh ministers and demanded that Easter communion be celebrated in the old way. As a result Rig together with Mean, another merchant, a flesher, an apothecary and an advocate were summoned before the privy council on the king's orders. In their depositions the six burgesses explained their scruples over kneeling. The flesher was accused of separating from the kirk, but denied it or any such intention. The archbishop of St Andrews denounced John Mean as one of those who kept private conventicles and as having formerly kept a Brownist minister in his house (who had since gone to Ireland and died there). Mean only denied that the minister had taught in his house, thus it seems tacitly admitting that there had been such a minister and such meetings.⁹

The privy council decided that the six burgesses were guilty of setting a very bad example "caryeing with it verie probable appeiranceis of mutinie and shisme" worthy of rigorous punishment. Mean, incidentally, was described by the council as a poor man, Rig was a wealthy one.¹⁰ The advocate, regarded as less guilty than the rest, was spared, but the other five were declared incapable of holding public office in kirk or burgh. In addition all five were banished from Edinburgh. Mean was sent to Elgin, Rig (the ringleader) was for a time held prisoner in Blackness Castle and then confined to his own house of Athernay in Fife. The king also imposed a very large fine on Rig, but this seems to have been cancelled after opposition from the privy council.¹¹

The banishments were of fairly short duration. Mean was allowed home at the end of 1624 to look after his family during an outbreak of plague, and though he was sent back to Elgin as the Easter communion of 1625 approached he was probably allowed back to Edinburgh soon afterwards. Similarly Rig's confinement was lifted in September 1626. The bishops had some sympathy with the dissidents' point of view and had no stomach for harsh persecution.¹²

⁹ J. Spottiswoode, *The History of the Church of Scotland* (3 vols., Bannatyne Club and Spottiswoode Society, 1850-1), iii, 268-9; *RPCS.*, 1622-5, ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh, 1896), 490; Calderwood, *History*, vii, 596-606; Laing, *Original Letters*, ii, 740-5, 828.

¹⁰ *RPCS.*, 1622-5, 503-4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 521-2, 524, 534, 538, 541; Calderwood, *History*, vii, 607, 609-10, 618-19; J. Row, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland* (Wodrow Society, 1842), 337; Laing, *Original Letters*, ii, 748-50, 752-5, 767, 775-6, 779-80.

¹² *RPCS.*, 1622-5, 597, 664, 666, 677-8, 690, 694, 700, 708-9; Calderwood, *History*, vii, 628, 632.

The sort of fears raised by the activities of the dissidents are shown in a proclamation against private meetings published on 10th June 1624. This related that some "affecting hypocriticallie the glorie of puritie and zeale above others" cast off obedience to the king and ministers, abstaining from worship "and in end, numbers of them have assembled themselves in private houses in Edinburgh, and other places, to hear from intruding ministers, preachings, exhortations, prayers, and all sort of exercises fitting their unrulie fantasies". Moreover they did this in time of public worship in the kirks, and gave their seditious conventicles the name of congregations. This introduced corruption in church government, and previously "such pernicious seeds of separation, singularitie of blind or fained zeale, have brought furth damned sects of Anabaptists, Familie of Love, Brounists, Arminians, Illuminats, and many such pests, enemies to religion, authoritie, and peace, and occasioned the murther of millions of people, and infinite other disturbances". Such meetings were therefore forbidden, except for religious exercise in families, which might be joined by any visitor eating or lodging with the family, but by no other stranger.¹³

This outspoken proclamation was followed up in July when members of the privy council took oaths purging themselves of holding conventicles and then (on the king's orders) summoned the provost, baillies and council of Edinburgh to do the same. All did so, and promised to seek out and punish conventicles. But one of the councillors, John Fleming (who was related to John Mean by marriage), when asked to say whether he had attended conventicles asked the chancellor, Sir George Hay, to define a conventicle. Hay replied that "it is a private meeting of men and women to a private religious exercise in time of public sermon", and Fleming then swore that he had attended no conventicles.¹⁴ This very narrow definition of a conventicle deprived the proclamation against them of much of its force, and it seems that in the years following private meetings at other times than public worship were held in Edinburgh virtually without hindrance. The king's intention of suppressing all such meetings had been thwarted by a council anxious to avoid trouble. John Mean and his friends probably continued their meetings though, now they were no longer persecuted, it is impossible to trace them in detail. Moreover now that he and others like him had been deprived of their elderships it was easier for the kirk to ignore their activities than before. The only time John Mean

¹³ *RPCS*, 1622-5, vii, 612-13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vii, 620-1; Laing, *Original Letters*, ii, 758-9, 760, 761. John Fleming's brother Bartholomew married a sister of Mean's wife. R. Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, ed. W. K. Tweedie (2 vols., Wodrow Society, 1845-7), i, 150-1; C. B. B. Wilson (ed.), *Roll of Edinburgh Burgesses and Guild Brethren, 1406-1700* (Scottish Record Society, 1929), 184.

appears to have been in trouble again before 1637 was in 1635 when he was summoned before the presbytery for not attending public worship on a fast day, and he escaped without punishment.¹⁵

What significance are we to attach to the controversies surrounding John Mean, William Rig and their supporters in the 1620s? All too often the abuse directed at them by their enemies has been taken at its face value, and these years have been taken as marking the beginnings of congregationalism and the entry of sects to Scotland.¹⁶ This is surely a mistake, for even though English puritan ideas may have influenced them these men were no separatists. They recognised the kirk as a true church, but tended to abstain from its worship through its corruptions and hold, so far as they could, pure worship of their own. William Rig declared that he detested all opinions of popular power over ministers "as smelling of that odious opinioun of the Browneistis", and protested he was free of such impious and scandalous beliefs.¹⁷ The fact that Mean and Rig were elders until deprived of office, their later careers and, above all, their connections with other radicals show that they were definitely presbyterians wishing to reform a corrupt but true kirk, not separatists or sectaries. One may conclude, as their opponents did, that their activities in attending conventicles held the seeds of separation, but this is a very different matter from saying that they were separatists.

Turning now to some of John Mean's friends and relations, it becomes clear that, far from being an isolated separatist, he lies in the heart of a wide circle of radical opponents of royal religious policy; and these friends and relatives are staunch presbyterians even though they are prepared to encourage conventicles, private meetings.

Conventicles in the South-West and Ulster

John Mean was married to Barbara Hamilton, and it was later said that it was she who was responsible for starting one of the riots in Edinburgh kirks on 23rd July 1637 which sparked off "the troubles".¹⁸ Their son John became minister of Anwoth.¹⁹ Many of Barbara Hamilton's relations married ministers. In particular, one of her sisters married Robert Blair, and two of her nieces married John McLellan and John Livingstone.²⁰

¹⁵ Row, *History*, 390.

¹⁶ H. Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism* (Glasgow, 1960), 6-7; W. I. Hoy, "The Entry of Sects into Scotland", *Reformation and Revolution*, ed. D. Shaw (Edinburgh, 1967), 178-9.

¹⁷ *RPCS*, 1622-5, 524; Laing, *Original Letters*, ii, 748-50.

¹⁸ R. Wodrow, *Analecta, or Materials for a History of Remarkable Providences*, ed. M. Leishman (4 vols., Maitland Club 1842-3), i, 64.

¹⁹ H. Scott (ed.), *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* (9 vols., Edinburgh, 1915-50), ii, 386.

²⁰ R. Blair, *Autobiography*, ed. T. McCrie (Wodrow Society, 1848), 117, 134; Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 150-2.

Mention of these ministers takes us at once to Ulster and to the western Lowlands, the centre of opposition to the corruptions of the kirk, for it was in these areas that these ministers were most active. All three of them had close connections with other ministers in the south-west who were fast coming to be recognised as leaders of such opposition, David Dickson, minister of Irvine, and Samuel Rutherford, minister of Anwoth. As we shall see, both favoured the holding of private prayer meetings, and both had close connections with those holding them in Edinburgh. These men all won themselves widespread popular support in the south-west by their preaching. The two outbreaks of religious revivalism in Scotland in these years, the "Stewarton sickness" of 1625 and the Kirk of Shotts revival of 1630 were both inspired mainly by David Dickson and John Livingstone.^{20a}

These radical ministers of the south-west were in many ways the heirs of Andrew Melville. To some of them — Dickson, Blair and Livingstone — Melville's teaching had been passed by his old friend and former Edinburgh minister, Robert Bruce (died 1631).^{20b} The same three had also come under the influence of the "Melvillian" Robert Boyd, who had been principal of Glasgow University from 1615 to 1622. During Boyd's years as principal Blair had been a regent in the university, Dickson and Livingstone students.^{20c} Yet it would have been an oversimplification simply to label the radical ministers of the 1620s and 1630s "Melvillians". Certainly they accepted Melville's ideas on church-state relations and on the need for a presbyterian church polity. But their holding of conventicles and their wish to purge the kirk of some of its traditional ceremonies seem to owe nothing to Melville. These were later developments arising as reactions to persecution.

Both Robert Blair and John Livingstone left autobiographies, and it is from these that we derive much of our information about the radicals in the kirk in the 1630s. Both, also, through their opposition to bishops and their dislike of ceremonies, failed to obtain parishes in Scotland and turned instead to the freer conditions in Ulster. It had only been a generation before that most of Ulster had been conquered from the native Irish and colonised by English and Scots settlers, most of the settlers in Antrim and Down being Scots. It was still in some ways a frontier area, where the power of central government, both civil and ecclesiastical, was weak. Moreover many of the Ulster bishops were Scots who had some sympathy with the opponents of the kirk in Scotland, and were prepared to make concessions to such as settled in Ulster, an area very short of ministers of

^{20a} W. J. Couper, *Scottish Revivals* (Dundee, 1918), 26-39.

^{20b} W. M. Campbell, *The Triumph of Presbyterianism* (Edinburgh, 1958), 11; D. C. MacNicol, *Robert Bruce* (Edinburgh, 1907, reprinted 1961), 158, 159, 178-9.

^{20c} Campbell, *Triumph of Presbyterianism*, 24.

any sort. Therefore in the 1620s many who quarrelled with the Scots bishops found a safe refuge in Ulster when things got too hot for them in Scotland. Most prominent among them were Blair and Livingstone.

Blair became minister of Bangor in 1622, Livingstone minister of Killinchy in 1630. Together with other Scots ministers in the area they established what was a presbyterian system in all but name — elders and deacons were elected in parishes, making up virtual kirk sessions with the ministers, and all the ministers met monthly in Antrim to preach and pray to large congregations assembled there. Such meetings, said Livingstone, were “sometimes as profitable as either presbyteries or synods”.²¹

Thus they remained loyal to a presbyterian system though they had left Scotland through their refusal to accept the authority of a corrupt kirk. They still regarded themselves as members of their native kirk though they defied it, just as New England puritans maintained they were still members of the church of England. When some English separatists came to Antrim the Scots ministers would have nothing to do with them.²² Yet in spite of their loyalty to the kirk some of the Scots ministers in Ulster took advantage of their freedom to introduce practices abhorrent to many in Scotland and which perhaps revealed English puritan influences. Probably they omitted from their worship some points traditional in the kirk which they had come to think unjustified. Though Livingstone’s statement that in Ireland he had “publict worship free of any inventions of men”²³ may only mean that he laid aside the Five Articles, one suspects that he and others also gave up the traditional practices which they were to emerge as opposing in and after 1639. And certainly Livingstone encouraged private prayer meetings, even when not driven to hold them by force of persecution. Thus sometimes crowds gathered on the Saturday before communion to hear a sermon, and spent the Saturday and Sunday nights “in severall companies, sometimes an minister being with them, sometimes themselves alone in conference and prayer”; “it is hard to judge whether there was more of the Lord’s presence in the publick or private meetings”.²⁴

Livingstone and Blair also used Ulster as a base for forays into Scotland, preaching and praying at both public and private meetings, retreating back to Ulster before the bishops could take effective action against them. The complaints of the Scots bishops to the king about this led Charles to spur the Irish bishops into

²¹ Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 139-43; Blair, *Autobiography*, 68, 71; P. Adair, *A True Narrative of the Rise and Progress of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, ed. W. D. Killen (Belfast, 1866), 1-2, 16-17. For background see J. S. Reid, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland* (3 vols., Belfast, 1867).

²² Blair, *Autobiography*, 83-4; Adair, *Narrative*, 27-8.

²³ Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, i, 144.

action. In 1631 Livingstone and Blair were suspended, and finally deposed from their ministries in 1634-5.²⁵ During these years when persecution was coming to interfere with his activities in Ulster Livingstone had 'private meetings in severall places' in his parish, preaching every Sunday in his mother-in-law's house. He was often in Scotland, preaching and attending communions. Sometimes he visited Edinburgh "where there were frequent privat meetings of Christians."²⁶

Similarly Robert Blair continued to preach in private in Ireland²⁷ and visited Scotland. Thus in 1635 he came to Edinburgh to get married a second time. There he attended "many private meetings . . . in private families, where some few eminent Christians convened, and spent the time mostly in prayer, with fastings and humiliation of soul". When possible a minister was present at such meetings "but often private Christians convened for prayer and conference" without one. And Blair's closest Edinburgh associates were William Rig of Athernay and his first wife's relations — and she of course had been the sister of John Mean's wife.²⁸

By this time the private prayer meetings of opponents of royal policy in Scotland were widespread, regular and well organised. From 1633 or 1634 onwards radical ministers kept regular fasts on the first Sunday of each quarter, privately inviting sympathetic members of their congregations to meetings to lament the corruptions of the church and pray for remedy "by which course they prevail'd much upon the Commons".²⁹ This practice was strongly supported by Samuel Rutherford when "some of the worthiest ministry in this kingdom" recommended it to him.³⁰

But though private meetings flourished the outlook seemed bleak. Persecution in Scotland seemed to be increasing and the activities of the Irish bishops in Ulster were destroying the safe refuge ministers had had there. Robert Blair therefore resolved on a drastic solution to their problems; "considering how precious a thing the public liberty of pure ordinances was" he decided to emigrate to New England, following the example of many English puritans. Early in 1634 he and others in Ulster who were willing to emigrate put their plan to John Livingstone, John McLellan (who was working in Ulster as a schoolmaster) and John Stewart, the provost of Ayr, all of whom agreed to take part in the emigration. Two men, Livingstone being one of them, were chosen to go to Massachusetts to consult the governor and council there and find a place to settle. They got no further than England, returning to Ulster after a series of delays and setbacks.³¹ But the scheme

²⁵ Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 145-6, 147; Adair, *Narrative*, 33-40.

²⁶ Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 147-8, 152-3, 157.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, i, 153.

²⁸ Blair, *Autobiography*, 137.

²⁹ H. Guthrie, *Memoirs* (Glasgow, 1747), 9-10.

³⁰ Rutherford, *Letters*, 92-3.

³¹ Blair, *Autobiography*, 104, 106-7; Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 148-9.

was not abandoned. In July 1634 John Winthrop, the governor of Massachusetts, received letters from "a godly preacher, Mr Levinston a Scotchman in the north of Ireland, whereby he signified, that there were many good Christians in those parts resolved to come hither, if they might receive satisfaction concerning some questions and propositions which they sent over".³² The questions probably concerned religion and the availability of land, and were evidently satisfactorily answered; in September it was agreed that the Scottish and Irish gentlemen who intended to settle in Massachusetts should have land on the Merrimac river.³³

In January 1635 the would-be emigrants received further encouragement; they met John Winthrop junior in Antrim "by whom they were thoroughly informed of all things, and received great encouragement to proceed";³⁴ Blair found Winthrop "a man of excellent parts",³⁵ while Livingstone told him that he hoped to see him again "in that land where a great part of my heart is already". Livingstone also suggested that Winthrop visit John Stewart in Ayr, David Dickson, and one James Murray in Edinburgh, telling him that he could rely on them.³⁶ Winthrop is known to have visited Scotland after leaving Ulster³⁷ but nothing is known of his activities there — though it seems likely that he continued to urge "godly people", such as he had met in Ulster, to emigrate.

Encouraged by letters from Massachusetts "full of kind invitations and large promises of good accommodation" as well as by Winthrop's visit, Blair, Livingstone and their friends built a ship near Belfast and they and their families, with many of their supporters, set sail in the Autumn of 1636. But they met with bad weather which nearly sank their ship, and eventually they turned and fled back to Ireland before the storms which had been opposing them. Convinced that this indicated that God did not wish them to emigrate, they made no further attempt to leave.³⁸

The readiness to go to New England was not confined to those who had actually made the attempt. Samuel Rutherford, now in banishment in Aberdeen, wrote to Blair, Livingstone and John Stewart sympathising with them over their venture's failure, saying that "If I saw a call for New England, I would follow it", for it was a place where one could "dwell among a people whose God is the Lord".³⁹

³² J. K. Hosmer (ed.), *Winthrop's Journal: "History of New England"* (2 vols., New York, 1908), i, 127.

³³ N. B. Shurtleff (ed.), *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (5 vols., Boston 1853-4), i, 129.

³⁴ Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*, i, 164.

³⁵ Blair, *Autobiography*, 105.

³⁶ A. B. Forbes (ed.), *Winthrop Papers* (5 vols., Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929-47), iii, 187-8.

³⁷ Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*, i, 164.

³⁸ Blair, *Autobiography*, 108, 140-7; Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 153-6.

³⁹ Rutherford, *Letters*, 188, 191, 298, 301.

This willingness to emigrate to escape the authority of a corrupt kirk does not indicate that those involved were adopting separatist ideas. Like most English puritans in New England, they still recognised their mother church as a true one. But though this might be the theory, in practice by going to New England the ministers would have been abandoning a corrupt kirk and establishing a new one — or joining a new one by fitting in with English puritans already there. Thus far down the road to separation had some of the more radical opponents of royal policy in the kirk been driven by their willingness to cut themselves off from the worship of the kirk and by their readiness to defy its authority. From a practical point of view their actions were only really consistent with maintaining that the kirk was a true kirk while there was a real hope of reformation to purge it of its corruptions. As hope of reformation receded so did the possibility of returning to full membership of and obedience to the kirk. Those who had set themselves partially outside the kirk would eventually cut themselves off from it completely in practice, whatever connection they claimed to maintain in principle. Migration to New England was convenient in that it allowed one thus to separate in practice while denying that one was doing so in theory; the mere separation in distance from the mother church involved in the move solved the problem.

So one may argue that some of the radicals in the kirk had moved down the road towards separation — though without admitting or realising that they were doing so. But the fact is that they never reached the end of that road, in spite of the circumstances driving them that way. This is partly an indication of how strong loyalty to the kirk was, even among the strongest opponents of its corruption. It was the “harlot mother” and needed reformed, not abandoned. And it is significant that the three ministers who attempted to settle in New England were all men who had, because of their views, failed to obtain parishes in Scotland. Those of the radical ministers who had Scots parishes hung on to them grimly, even if at times this meant being less open in propagating their views than they would have liked, for the ministry within the mother kirk was a great trust and responsibility which they would not give up unless forced to. Rutherford only talked of going to New England after he had been banished from his parish and seemed to have little hope of ever being allowed to return to it.

If this loyalty to the national kirk was one element in keeping men from separation, its counterpart was the relative weakness of persecution. The king's instruments in imposing his policies, the bishops and the privy council, were less than whole hearted in crushing opposition. Partly through sympathy with some of the dissidents' attitudes, partly through a weak fear of stirring up trouble by repression, the authorities often ignored the activities of their opponents, only intervening when most blatantly defied.

Whatever the covenanters were later to say of the terrible persecutions of the bishops, no regime which allowed men like Rutherford and Dickson to spread their ideas for years on end with little hinderance can really be accused of brutal, unremitting repression. One of the reasons that Scotland produced no separatists was that men were not driven to such a last resort by effective repression.

Lack of efficient persecution helped to prevent the appearance of separatists, but it allowed the growth of organised and only partly secret opposition to royal policies with, as we have seen, private meetings or conventicles widespread at least in Edinburgh and the south west. This opposition gathered increasing moderate support among both laymen and ministers in the mid 1630s. The king's conduct in the parliament of 1633, the new book of canons of 1636, the news that a new liturgy was to be imposed, and wild rumours of the king's further intentions each provided a spur to mounting fear, frustration and determination to resist. Reformation, which many had despaired of achieving, suddenly began to seem a real possibility. And in organising the resistance to the king that was to bring about this reformation the radical favourers of private meetings whom we have been discussing took a leading part.

John Livingstone and Robert Blair found no refuge in Ulster when their voyage to New England failed. Their arrest was ordered and they fled to Scotland. Here they were helped and encouraged by David Dickson at Irvine. Livingstone went to Edinburgh where he stayed for some time "being at some private meetings every day" so frequent had conventicles become, but he returned to Irvine in March 1637 and spent the following months in the west preaching in public and leading the worship in private meetings. As persecution in Ireland increased many Scots settlers fled back to Scotland and he ministered to them.⁴⁰ Blair too preached in public and private in the west⁴¹ though, still despairing of reform in Scotland, he tried at one point to go to France as chaplain to a Scots regiment, only changing his mind at the last minute. While in Edinburgh over this business he stayed with John Mean and Barbara Hamilton.⁴²

The Radical Party: Triumph and Schism

Of the detailed planning of resistance we know little — in the first few months of disorder it is hard to judge how much was spontaneous and how much carefully planned; and one has a

⁴⁰ Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 157-8, 161.

⁴¹ Blair, *Autobiography*, 147-8, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 151-3. Little is known of Mean's activities after 1637, but as late as 1649 John McLellan and Robert Blair stayed in his house, Wodrow, *Select Biographies*, i, 331. In the same year Mean became a member of the burgh council, M. Wood (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of Edinburgh, 1642-55* (Edinburgh, 1938), 213.

strong suspicion that powerful laymen had a much more prominent part in the planning that was done than the surviving evidence indicates. But we do know enough about the organisation of the Edinburgh riots of 23rd July 1637 which sparked off the crisis to see that the radical conventicle holders played an important part. As already mentioned, Barbara Hamilton was reputed to have begun one of the riots. One of the meetings held to organise them took place in the house of Nicholas Balfour, who had been in trouble for holding conventicles in the 1620s. One of the two ministers at the meeting was David Dickson, the other being the more moderate Alexander Henderson.⁴³ The same two ministers were at the best documented of the meetings (on 6th July) held to plan the riots.⁴⁴

The growth of the revolt need not be related here. In the early months Dickson and Henderson were outstanding among the ministers involved. Rutherford, Blair and Livingstone also played important parts. In 1638 the movement triumphed in the general assembly at Glasgow. Bishops and the court of high commission were abolished, along with the Five Articles, the book of canons and the new prayer book. Livingstone and McLellan became ministers of Stranraer and Kirkcudbright respectively in 1638, Blair minister of St Andrews in 1639. In the same year Rutherford became professor of divinity at St Andrews, and the following year Dickson took up the same office in Glasgow.

The victory of the covenanters did not bring unity in the kirk, however. For many of the radicals abolition of the Five Articles was not enough; some older practices in the worship of the kirk seemed to them illegal human inventions, and many denied even that they were traditional in the kirk. Moreover they wished to continue to hold private meetings, as they had been accustomed to in years past; they did not see this as any threat to presbyterian church government or discipline. But the great majority of covenanting ministers regarded any further changes in worship and the holding of private meetings with horror, even if they were supported by a disproportionately large number of the best-known ministers. They saw such ideas as the result of English puritan and Brownist influences, and were determined to eradicate them before they infected the newly achieved purity of the kirk. The radicals on the other hand saw these ideas not as an infection but as things necessary to complete the restoration of the purity of the kirk.

The ideas which the radicals tried to impose arose primarily out of the circumstances of persecution. In opposing the Five Articles it was a natural step to go on to question other ceremonies. Denied pure public worship, it was natural to resort to private meetings. Undoubtedly English puritan ideas in these

⁴³ Guthry, *Memoirs*, 23-4.

⁴⁴ J. M. Henderson (ed.), "An 'Advertistment' about the Service Book. 1637", *Scottish Historical Review*, xxiii (1925-6), 199-204.

matters had some influence on the radicals, but such influences are impossible to trace and were probably of relatively minor importance. The actions of the radicals mainly grew out of the mainstream of Scottish presbyterianism under the pressure of persecution. Those who opposed the radicals tried to deny this. They represented these ideas as introduced from England and Ireland, thus freeing the kirk of responsibility for spawning such dangerous alien innovations. Certainly a few English puritans did come to Scotland after revolt began in 1637. Certainly many of the Scots who fled from Ulster as persecution intensified proved supporters of the radicals when they arrived in Scotland. But, at least as regards prayer meetings, the evidence shows that they were widespread in Scotland in the 1630s; they were not innovations introduced after 1637 as those opposed to them maintained. In the great majority of cases it was not outsiders who persuaded people in Scotland to support private meetings and changes in worship, but ministers of the kirk.

Both Robert Baillie and Henry Guthry asserted that such ideas had been brought to Scotland by refugees from Ireland; neither mentioned that private meetings had long been known in Scotland, and had indeed perhaps been introduced from Scotland to Scots settlers in Ireland rather than *vice versa*. Guthry does admit that Rutherford, Blair and Dickson countenanced such ideas, but he puts his emphasis on refugees and English puritans as their source — he mentions a tailor called Thomas Livingstone and a surgeon called Cornall who came from England after the troubles began and were suspected of spreading Brownist ideas, but nothing is known of their activities.⁴⁵ Whatever the influence of such English puritan “missionaries” in spreading private meetings in Scotland, it was far outweighed by the influence of the radical Scots ministers.

The growth of what has in this paper been called a radical party in the kirk in the 1620s and 1630s, holding private meetings and advocating alterations in worship, was to have far reaching effects on the future development of the kirk, as a summary of these by way of conclusion will show.

After the covenanters triumphed in 1638 most ministers wished to suppress private meetings and innovations in worship.⁴⁶ But the radical minority, strongest among the leaders of the kirk, managed to resist this pressure. After a series of confrontations in the general assembly a compromise act of 1641, grudgingly and only implicitly, admitted the right to hold private meetings, disguised under the name of “mutual edification”. Attention then turned to the innovations in worship demanded by the radicals.

⁴⁵ R. Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, ed. D. Laing (3 vols., Bannatyne Club 1841-2), i, 249; Guthry, *Memoirs*, 78.

⁴⁶ For these later developments see D. Stevenson, “The Radical Party in the Kirk, 1637-45”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (1974-forthcoming).

They got their own way in this matter in and after 1645 through the Westminster Standards. The majority of ministers reluctantly adopted the innovations, not to please the radicals but to bring religious unity with England nearer by satisfying English puritans.

The victory of the radicals was short lived, however. In 1650 the kirk turned increasingly towards the king and war with the English Independents; a minority, the protesters, refused to accept this and the kirk split into bitterly hostile factions, the protester minority and the resolutioner majority. Most of the radicals of the 1630s and 1640s (with the important exception of David Dickson) emerged as leaders of the protesters. In practice the protesters virtually separated from the resolutioner-dominated kirk, setting up their own kirk sessions and presbyteries in some areas, even holding their own general assembly. Of course they denied the charge of schism by claiming, as so many in similar situations had done before them in other lands, that they were the true kirk, the resolutioner majority a corrupt one. But the charges of the opponents of the radicals that their tendencies led towards Independency and separation seemed confirmed by events. In fact it was probably not such inherent tendencies in their ideas that led the radicals to split the kirk so much as new ideas and influences absorbed from England during the 1640s — though doubtless they absorbed these new influences all the more easily as they had something in common with their existing ideas. Much as the radicals might hate the English Independents in some ways, they recognised that they had something in common with them and were impressed by their success. It was such new influences — admittedly often unconscious — which led the radicals virtually to secede from the corrupt kirk of the majority in the 1650s, though in the 1620s and 1630s they had refused thus almost to abandon their “harlot mother”.

To conclude and summarise, a minority of religious radicals in the 1620s and 1630s encouraged private meetings as a form of resistance to the bishops. Such meetings became widespread at least in the Western Lowlands and Edinburgh. After the fall of the bishops the radicals forced the majority of ministers, who were deeply suspicious of such meetings, to countenance them and various innovations in worship. This success helped to restore unity in the kirk, but this was soon destroyed by the resolutioner-protester split. The protesters were led by former radicals. Thus there is continuity between the holders of prayer meetings under persecution, their supporters in the 1640s, and the protesters. And through the protesters there is continuity with the conventicles of the 1660s to the 1680s under renewed persecution and with the prayer societies of the eighteenth century. Thus the origins of the protester movement and of the conventicles of the later covenanters lie much deeper in the history of the kirk than is often realised.